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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HAVANA 000646

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SUBJECT: CUBA: PROBLEMZ IN SKOOL

HAVANA 00000646 001.3 OF 002

Classified By: COM Michael E. Parmly; Reasons 1.4 (b/d)

11. (SBU) Summary: A group of independent teachers discussed with USINT COM and staff the many problems facing Cuba's educational system, making it clear that the Cuban regime's self-promoted reputation as an education success story is propaganda based on only some elements of truth. Main problems are:

-- Poor conditions of work, including low salaries, for most teachers;

-- Nationwide staffing gaps, filled by unqualified substitutes;

-- Politicization of subject matter;

-- Political criteria for higher grades and places in the best schools.

The independent teachers acknowledged that the Castro regime did successfully broaden access to education in the 1960s and that technical quality of instruction was (1) inherited from pre-revolutionary period, and (2) maintained with large infusions of aid from the Soviet Union until 1990. They said that Cuban education has gone steadily downhill since then, a trend made even worse by the regime's information blockade leaving Cuba way behind the rest of the world in computers and internet. End Summary.

12. (SBU) The Myth: The Castro regime has claimed education, health, and sports to be the three "great achievements of the revolution," a boast that is echoed all over the world, even in the context of international reports about Cuba's dismal human rights record. Regime apologists are willing to accept human rights abuses as a fair exchange for the "three great achievements," and then blame any shortcomings on the United States' embargo. Cuba has, by statistics the regime generates itself, the highest literacy rate in Latin America, and exports its literacy campaign, called "Yes I can" ("Yo si puedo") to other countries in the region. Cuba also imports students from all over the third world for certain university programs, especially in medicine and physical education.

13. (SBU) The reality, as usual, is not consistent with the myth. Cubans themselves tend to joke about the "three great

achievements" by saying that the "three great failings" of the revolution are: Breakfast, lunch and dinner. We have heard and seen many anecdotal examples of Cuban education falling short; as recently as last week, two nuns from eastern Cuba told COM, DCM and PAO that school children in their parish commonly have problems with basic reading and math skills. Letters sent to USINT from Cuban adult citizens are typically riddled with spelling or syntax errors, not necessarily demonstrating illiteracy, but well short of the standard you would expect from Cuba "the education superpower." Regarding the foreign students, they are in schools with better facilities than those available for Cubans; tuition is not free to the sending country and is in most cases a foreign exchange earner for the Cuban regime.

14. (C) At the urging and with the help of Roberto de Miranda, president of the dissident independent teachers organization ("Colegio de Pedagogos Independientes"), USINT hosted an open forum for some two dozen independent teachers. They came from all over the island, and represented a wide spectrum of subject matter expertise and experience at all educational levels. One member is a Russian citizen who resides permanently in Cuba and became a dissident out of disillusionment with all things Soviet and Castroist. All the members were fired from their teaching jobs when the regime got wind of their opposition activities. They are now officially unemployed, have had to take jobs as farmers or grave-diggers, or eke out a living from remittances or the black market.

15. (U) Observations from the independent teachers were as follows:

-- Education is overly politicized. Students, starting from an early age, are indoctrinated with revolutionary slogans and ideology, and are force-fed the regime's version of Cuban and world history. They join the "pioneers" (a cross between

HAVANA 00000646 002.3 OF 002

Boy/Girl Scouts and Hitler Youth) in the elementary grades and recite the oath "We will grow up to be like Che Guevara." Teachers and students are graded on both content and political loyalty all through the system. Opportunities for advancement are denied for the non-believers.

-- Teachers, like doctors, are an export commodity. The best incentives are offered to the ones that go on overseas missions, leaving the island short-staffed. Also, low pay and inadequate teaching supplies are disincentives. Teachers cannot make ends meet on 15 dollars a month, so prefer to either take jobs in a higher paying area (like tourism), or hustle on the side. Substitutes ("emergentes," the same word used for baseball pinch-hitters) are unqualified. It is common for the fill-in teachers to "teach" by sitting children in front of a TV and playing video cassettes. The teachers said that many parents have turned to hiring private tutors, given the poor quality of teaching in state classrooms, in order to help their kids get an education.

-- Students in their adolescence are commonly sent off to rural camps for their schooling. There they are forced to do agricultural work, and are vulnerable to more indoctrination because they are away from their families. Food and sanitary conditions are poor in these rural camps, and girls report being sexually abused. Needless to say, children who pass through these camps are exposed to values that are morally bankrupt.

-- Cuba does a poor job of preparing students for the information age. The GOC's internet restrictions make access per capita the lowest in the hemisphere, and computers even without internet access, are not affordable except to the nomenklatura or families with relatives who send remittances.

-- The independent teachers were willing to give the regime

credit for having made education universally accessible in the early years of the revolution, but at the cost of so much political indoctrination. Purely technical subjects, they said, were taught well during the Soviet client-state period, thanks to large subsidies that allowed teachers to earn adequate salaries.

16. (C) Comment: Educating one's children is a Cuban cultural value that has little to do with the coming to power of Fidel Castro 48 years ago. The educational system that evolved under the Castro regime has done very well to bolster the regime's international image, while also leaving three generations of Cuban students exposed to only official versions of history and any other subject matter besides hard sciences. When they study economics, for example, they are taught that the profit motive is evil, that corporations exist to exploit workers, and that securities markets are examples of greed and speculation. All things considered we would give the Cuban system at best a C-Plus; which is in line with other countries in this region, but a failing grade when compared to the A-Plus the regime always awards itself in its relentless propaganda on this subject. During a post-Castro transition we envision that the educational system will require a great deal of modernization, complete new sets of history and social science textbooks, and ideological detox for teachers. The assembled teachers were excited by the debate ("tertulia") with us, and we are already planning follow-up activity to focus on helping Cuban youth overcome the failure of the system that self-advertises so much.

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